
*A Journal of the First Assembly of the
World Council of Churches (2):
Covenanting to live in Fellowship*

Amsterdam Concertgebouw, 23 August 1948, 10:00

I. “The World Council of Churches is constituted and established”

Sunday worship leads to Monday work. So, as you enter the Concert Hall, don’t let your aesthetic imagination be captured by the bust of the sublime Johann Sebastian Bach. And remember to keep your IBM earphone at hand if you need simultaneous interpretation into English (channel 5), French (6) or German (7). You can listen to the speaker on channel 4. It’s impressive. One feels here like in a meeting of the United Nations.

The moderator of this first plenary session is the Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher. At the end of his future mandate as one of the seven presidents of the World Council of Churches, he will remark, not without humour that as a president of the WCC, he was elected to do nothing and did it well...

The first speaker is no other than the New York Presbyterian Samuel McCrea Cavert, the future “chief architect” of the US National Council of Churches. Eleven years ago, in a meeting about the foundation of the WCC held in London in 1937, Archbishop William Temple’s asked the question “what name shall we now give the child?” McCrea Cavert proposed the name “World Council of Churches”. Temple agreed: “Why not? That’s what we really need and want.”

On channel 5, McCrea Cavert warns the delegates that this is not “just another ecumenical conference”: it is an assembly meant to create “a permanent instrument of

fellowship and co-operation on a world-wide scale". He explains that the assembly has three main components: worship, work, study. Robert Bilheimer, right now sitting behind the chairman, will write in 1988 that "many years later I marvelled at how Benedictine was this triumvirate".

Now is the time to covenant for a fellowship of churches. *Le Pasteur Marc Boegner*, a symbol of Protestant resistance to the recent German occupation of France, introduces in French a resolution ending with the following words: "... and that the formation of the World Council of Churches be declared to be and is hereby completed". The resolution is adopted without opposition or, as the WCC general secretary Willem Visser 't Hooft likes to say, *nemine contradicente*.

The Archbishop of Canterbury then rises and faces the assembly: "By the vote you've just given, the World Council of Churches is constituted and established". Applause. Then a strange silence: apparently no plan for a commemoration have been made. The chairman calls for silent prayer. "In this strange simplicity", Bilheimer will write, "the event stood by itself".

II. But what exactly has been "constituted and established"?

But what exactly is this fellowship of churches which has just been "constituted and established" without any precedent in the history of Christianity? Is the new WCC the embryo of a Geneva-governed global church bringing together Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants against the Church of Rome and its Pope? Is it right that by becoming a member of the WCC, my Reformed Church must re-establish the office of bishop and embrace the Orthodox veneration of icons, relics and saints? Is the WCC the new global arm of the western capitalist powers in their cold war against the growing oikoumene of proletarians of all nations who are also uniting?

Because it is without precedent in church history, while at the same time closely related to Christianity's shameful record of schisms, anathemas and violence, the World Council of Churches will spend part of this assembly time and the coming fifteen years trying to understand and to explain itself theologically.

III. A fellowship of churches in “counsel” with each other

General Secretary Visser ‘t Hooft tried it first, in an address to the assembly at the end of this morning session.

Two years ago, he published an article on what is the WCC and what it is not. We are a fellowship or *koinonia* of churches in which “common witness is rendered to the Lordship of Christ” he says. He is certainly thinking of the theological basis of the WCC, the first article of its constitution: “The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior”. With roots in youth inter-denominational work of the second half of the 19th century, the Christo-centrism of the WCC basis has taken a new and rather prophetic meaning during the struggle of the Confessing Church against Nazism in Germany.

This Christocentric formula points to God’s gift of unity in Christ and brings the churches together in the World Council of Churches. Right. But the churches remain divided; they do not live in full visible unity expressed in the breaking the one eucharistic bread. That is why, Visser ‘t Hooft goes on to say, “we are a Council of Churches, not the Council of the undivided Church”. I beg your pardon: a council which is not the council?

We are “a council”, Visser ‘t Hooft explains, not in the sense of the early “ecumenical councils” but in the sense of ecumenical “counsel”: as divided churches that accept the lordship and divinity of Jesus Christ, we are covenanting right now to be a fellowship of churches which will be in “counsel” with each other. That is why

our name is *Rat* in German, *Consejo* in Spanish, *Conseil* in French, *Conselho* in Portuguese.

This means that the WCC is not above the churches but of the churches, for the renewal and unity of the churches. Finally, the word “churches” in the WCC name, Visser ‘t Hooft concludes, “indicates our weakness and our shame before God, for there can be and there is finally only one Church of Christ”.

IV. The Catholics will help the World Council of Churches to clarify its self-understanding

Although this proves helpful to clarify the authority of the WCC, it does not seem to be enough. During the assembly, Committee II will shed further light. The WCC does not desire “to usurp any of the functions which already belong to its constituent churches”, or to legislate for them; it disavows “any thought of becoming a single unified church structure independent of the churches...” While the spectrum of a Geneva-governed global church seems to be defused, the question of the meaning of WCC membership for the way in which each church understands itself and the other churches in relation to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church begs urgent further clarification. This may look like the subject of a PhD thesis, but it is in fact a very concrete, sensitive question: no less than the future of Orthodox participation in the WCC is at stake in it.

Strangely enough, or providentially, it is a meeting to be held confidentially at the Istina Centre in Paris next year, involving WCC and Roman Catholic theologians such as the Dominican Yves Congar, the Jesuit historian Jean Daniélou, and the philosopher Jean Guitton that will prepare the ground for a lasting clarification of the nature of the relations among churches in the WCC, later embodied in the 1950 Central Committee document “The Church, the Churches, and the World Council of Churches” or simply “The Toronto Statement”. Orthodox participation will be secured. The discussion

will continue at least until the 1963 Faith and Order World Conference.

But this is no longer about the Amsterdam's Concert Hall, where the assembly which has covenanted to live in fellowship earlier this morning will turn in the coming days into an assembly of serious study about "Man's Disorder and God's Design". More to come...

[This imaginary journal is based on reliable sources, among them W. A. Visser 't Hooft, *The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, London, SCM Press, 1949.]